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VENETIAN WOODCUT
IN VORAGINE, LEGENDARIO DE SANCTI, 1499

EXHIBITION OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE WOODCUTS

ON the afternoon of November 5 there will be a private view, for members of the Museum and their friends, of a loan exhibition of Italian Renaissance woodcuts, which will be open to the public from the morning of November 6 through Sunday, February 17. Of the two classes of prints shown, those made prior to 1500 are all book illustrations, while those made after that date are for the most part large single sheets. Of these latter, many, known in the language of the collector as *chiaroscuros*, are printed in color. A catalogue of the exhibition has been prepared and will be on sale.

For this, the first exhibition of such prints to be held in New York, the Museum is especially indebted to J. Pierpont Morgan and George A. Plimpton of this city, and to J. B. Ayer of Boston and Paul J. Sachs of Cambridge, whose generous aid has made it possible. Mr. Morgan has contributed from his library many of the most important and famous woodcut books of the period, while Dr. Ayer has lent his large and interesting collection of *chiaroscuros*. It is important to note that most of the items lent by Mr. Morgan have in the past belonged to either Richard Bennett or William Mitchell, both great bibliophiles, and the latter, in addition, one of the most intelligent collectors of woodcuts that the world

has ever known. The Ayer Collection was formed with the aid and advice of the late Sylvester Rosa Koehler, for many years curator of prints at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and widely known as one of the great authorities on the history and technique of the woodcut.

Many of these woodcut books are among the earliest things that were collected and preserved, a few of them having brought high prices as early as the end of the first quarter of the sixteenth century, while all of them have been objects of esteem among cultivated people for at least three hundred years, a record of continuous appreciation that few things, aside from a small number of paintings and sculptures, can boast of. As for the single prints, the place they have occupied in the eyes of collectors may be judged from the fact that when several of those now exhibited were recently removed from the leaves of the books in which they had been placed in the early part of the eighteenth century, they were found to have been backed and rebacked, the successive layers of blank paper on which they had from time to time been carefully laid down for preservation by their early owners showing water marks several of which date back into the sixteenth century. Although they are not so well known in this country as prints of finer texture by more modern artists, they have the sanction of many generations of intelligent appreciation, and if for nothing

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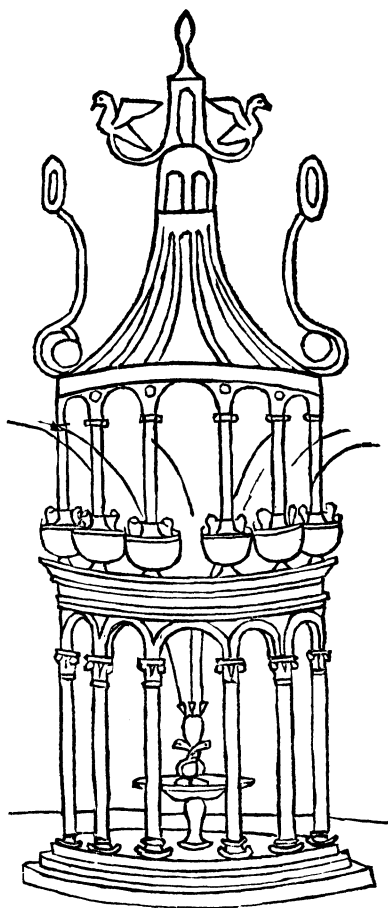
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VENETIAN WOODCUT
IN COLUMNNA, HYPNEROTOMACHIA
POLIPHILI, 1499

else should be objects of respect and interest.

None of the most primitive Italian woodcuts are exhibited, as they are known to exist only in a few of the great European collections, but there are particularly beautiful examples of the woodcuts used by the illuminators to embellish the margins of books, one of the very earliest forms of woodcut work. As the history of the woodcut, like that of engraving and etch-

signs of such artists as Raphael, Parmigiano, Titian, and Mantegna.

Among the more important items shown are the *Meditations of Cardinal Torquemada*, containing impressions from the blocks used in the first illustrated Italian book; the *Foligno Divina Commedia* of 1487, the first really illustrated edition of Dante's great poem; Valturius' *Art of War* of 1472, the first illustrated book about the science of war; Calandri's *Arithmetica* of



FLORENTINE WOODCUT
IN SAVONAROLA, *COMPENDIO DI REVELATIONE*, APRIL 23, 1496

ing, is very largely that of book decoration, it has been possible to illustrate in rather limited space the development of the woodcutter's art in Italy from the first woodcuts printed in an Italian book to the full glory of the work produced in Florence and Venice between the years 1490 and 1500. Few books produced after the latter date are shown, although there are typical examples of the several styles of woodcut book decoration which prevailed during the succeeding century. The walls of the gallery are hung with the large single prints, most of them in color, which were produced during the sixteenth century after the de-

1490, the first arithmetic and one of the most charmingly illustrated and decorated books ever made; many of the little tracts issued at Florence in connection with the Savonarolan incident, containing delightful woodcuts which are among the masterpieces of the art; the first Euclid with its splendid decoration; the famous Venetian editions of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Voragine; and two copies of the very beautiful and important *Fasciculus Medicinæ* of Ketham. There are also Saint Bonaventure's *Devout Meditations*, impressions from a number of the famous blocks which first appeared in the Mallermi Bible of

1490, two copies of Colonna's Strife of Love in a Dream, so cherished because of its woodcuts that it is frequently reputed the most beautiful book ever printed, and the famous Vallisumbrosian Missal, laden from cover to cover with woodcuts, and long regarded as one of the most remarkable of all prayer books. Among the single prints may be pointed out the Death of Ananias, the earliest dated Italian chiaroscuro; the Sibyl after Raphael, well and tenderly remembered through its reproduction as the vignette upon the title page of the second series of Palgrave's Golden Treasury; and a number of other prints by Ugo da Carpi, among which is his great Diogenes. There are many charming prints after Parmigiano, several of the very important and impressive chiaroscuros by Andreani after Mantegna's Triumphs of Caesar, and a number of the quite remarkable prints in black and white by Boldrini after Titian. Not the least interesting of the black and whites are six of the set of Labors of Hercules long attributed to the great French artist Geoffroy Tory, but now known to be by Giovanni Andrea Vavassori of Venice.

The Italian woodcut, almost invariably intended for decorative use, owes much of its charm and interest to the fact that it was made for a specific purpose and in response to a definite economic demand. Having, therefore, an immediate and practical *raison d'être* of a kind lacking to most modern "fine prints," as that term has been defined by Sir Frederick Wedmore, it differs from them in many respects, not the least important of which is a certain, may one say, pragmatic quality. For they "work," and they were meant to "work," were contrived and executed to fill needs. Open of line and, on occasion, rough of texture as they are, they almost without exception have that essential character which marks every truly functional thing. In great part made by anonymous artists for the pleasure of the anonymous public, these woodcuts are among the most delightful manifestations of "popular art," as in them is to be seen in a remarkably pure and isolated way that peculiar craftsmanlike quality upon which all truly popu-

lar art is based. The work, growing out of its time and country, in large part a reflection not of its most eminent men and the complexity of their thought, but of the desires and mentality of the crowd, is always thought out and carried out in what one may call the commonplaces of the day, the cheerful, ingenious, frequently charming, and often careless expression of those who live in a great and living tradition. Here are the pictorial word and phrase of those who looked to Botticelli and Raphael and Titian as their great contemporary painters; and although we of today must to some extent look at these prints through the achievement of those greater masters, we must be careful to remember that the work of those masters was but the supreme excellence of the common idiom, and that without that idiom with its freshness and its raciness their work would have been other than it was. One other thing, also, it is well to bear in mind, and that is that with few exceptions these prints were produced cheaply and presumably in large quantities for popular consumption. They were so cheap and so popular that, almost literally, they were consumed, and many of them are today of extraordinary rarity. Impressions of such "quality" as are expected in nineteenth-century prints can not be had except by accident, for not only were their surfaces worn away by the too familiar thumb and the tear and wear of the small household, but the collector of prints as things in themselves had yet to make his appearance when they were made, and in consequence they were printed *tel quel* for the chapman and the small bookseller.

The Florentine woodcut book illustrations, in the opinion of such competent authorities as Paul Kristeller and Bernhard Berenson, among others, are among the most noteworthy and charming ever made. The arrangement of whites and black, the delightful and often drastic simplification of statement, and above all the frankest utilization of the peculiar qualities which the wood-block, and the wood-block alone, will yield under the knife, have combined to give them their niche apart in the temple of beauty. Such prints as that of Savona-



FLORENTINE WOODCUT
IN SAVONAROLA, TRACTATO DEL
SACRAMENTO DELLA MESSA
ABOUT 1495

rola Preaching in the Cathedral, the Pietà in which Christ stands upon the altar, and Savonarola in his cell, bid fair for recognition among the greatest masterpieces of the wood-block. The Venetian woodcuts, not so frequently pictorially successful as the Florentine, rank high in the small number of fine engraved ornaments, more than holding their own in the company of the Otto prints, the German Little Masters, and the various French ornemanistes, a field which, however limited its appeal may be, has engaged the talents of many very great draughtsmen, and offered unlimited scope for the display of consummate artistry.

The large woodcuts on the walls were not meant for close inspection, their function being wall decoration and their qualities all correspondingly bold. If regarded as portfolio prints, they are undoubtedly failures, but they were not made to be kept in portfolios or seen in the hand, and to judge them from that point of view would be to commit an injustice. Seen the way they were meant to be seen, with and as a part of the furnishing of a room, and at a dis-

tance, they are among the most successful prints ever made, for they are among the few prints which have either the size or the carrying power to justify their being qualified as decorative. Once these things are taken into account, the frequently beautiful draughtsmanship of these prints and their usually most accomplished composition stand forth and compel admiration.

Many people have come to think that a "print" is *per se* something to be examined close under the eye, to be liked or disliked according as its texture is comforting when held close to. But many of the prints produced during the great periods of art do not justify such a point of view. Prints, like paintings, may be minute as miniatures, or rough as great mural decorations, their artistry depending in no wise upon the minuteness of their texture or the singleness of hand that did them, but upon the draughtsmanship, composition, and decorative qualities which are displayed in the completed work, however they got there. And from this point of view this exhibition contains an unusual number of masterpieces.

W. M. I., JR.

